

Willie Apiata VC: The Reluctant Hero

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This book is the exciting autobiography of Willie Apiata, the holder of the first Victoria Cross for New Zealand. Willie and his three sisters were raised by their mother in Te Kaha, a small settlement on the East Coast of New Zealand. While growing up, Willie made the most of the outdoors. It was at the beach, in the bush and in the sea that he developed his confidence, independence, courage and stamina.

Throughout his life, Willie has set himself challenges. Not all of these challenges were achieved the first time but Willie is not a person to give up. His ability to stay focussed on a task is remarkable.



Willie is an ordinary person who performed an extraordinary feat. By reading his story, you will discover that if those events were to be repeated then he would do nothing different. Willie Apiata is a true New Zealand hero.

For the teacher

Much of the appeal of this text to the middle school is that Willie writes as he speaks. We get a true feeling for him and how he thinks and acts.

The autobiography lends itself to students undertaking individual tasks and some group research. This could fit in with social history curriculum. It reflects differences between rural and urban life during the 1980 and 1990s. It also explores New Zealand's involvement in world conflicts. The written forms of explanations, reports and biography are suggested for writing.

Before you read

1. Individually or in pairs, study the paratexts – the cover, title, back cover blurb, dedication and anything else that is not the story. Predict what the task was that earned Willie his VC. Record your ideas so you can check your prediction after reading the book.
2. The book's subheading is A Reluctant Hero. Use your dictionary to define hero and reluctant. Write one or more sentences that give meaning to the subheading. Check your meaning after reading the book.

Following the story

For a whole class reading, the following activities are useful for focussing students' attention to comprehension and language. During the reading, the teacher can allocate one or two students to be responsible for recording answers to the chapter focus questions.



Prologue – Sanctuary p.7

1. Find out what these words mean – reception, lapis lazuli, memoir, guerilla, souvenir, intricately, whakapapa, tokotoko.
2. Definitions of sanctuary include:
 - a consecrated place where sacred objects are kept
 - refuge: a shelter from danger or hardship
 - chancel: area around the altar of a church for the clergy and choir; often enclosed by a lattice or railingWhich definition best suits Rennie Lines for Willie? Why might this be a place where he is relaxed and comfortable? Who could he be trying to avoid? Why?
3. A generalisation is made by reading details then forming a conclusion. It may not always be true. Read the list of objects described in Willie's room at Rennie Lines. Write a paragraph (generalisation) about what you think he's interested in.
4. SAS is an acronym for Special Air Services. Complete an internet search for SAS. Write then share three interesting facts about this group.

Chapter One - The Big Backyard p.11

1. Find out what these words mean: stamina, bazooka, clairvoyant, Fuhrer.
2. A cliché is an overused term. The author talks about other people in Willie's family who had the same qualities as Willie. If someone has similar qualities or mannerisms as someone else in the family they are sometimes called 'a chip off the old block'. What does this cliché mean? Share any quality that you and another family member have.
3. When they were young, Willie and his sisters celebrated their birthdays on the same day. Give reasons why their mother did this.
4. Willie had lots of freedom when he was growing up. Make a list of his activities. Discuss whether parents would allow children this much independence today. Give reasons why they may or may not.
5. From a young age, Willie was taught that he had to be responsible for his actions. Give an example of this.
6. Although Willie gives the impression he had a carefree childhood, it wasn't all fun. How do you know this?
7. By the time Willie left primary school he had many skills. List them then compare them to the skills you had then.

Chapter Two - Hunter p.21

1. Find a definition for perseverance. Read and discuss a situation where Willie used his perseverance.



2. Read what Willie's Dad said when Willie arrived home with the pig. Give reasons why he might say that. How do you think Willie dealt with the situation?
3. Willie gives a vivid description of hunting. Some of the things he does might make people in towns and cities feel squeamish. Discuss and create a top five actions list. Number one is "I could never do that...ever!"

Chapter Three – Thrill Seeker p.28

1. Willie says that differences can usually be settled without fighting. Choose one of the situations he describes and brainstorm ideas for resolving the conflict differently.
2. Why do you think Willie's mum tried to provoke him to lash out when he was drinking? What might she have been trying to do or find out?
3. Find a definition for adrenaline. What has it got to do with this chapter? What is your favourite adrenaline activity? Are any of your activities more exciting than Willie's? Explain.

Chapter Four – Road Warrior p.33

1. Find out what these words mean – commission, territorials, demolition, claymore.
2. Whatever job Willie did, he always tried to make it as interesting as possible. He often did this by competing against himself or others. Discuss why competition can make an activity more interesting. Share an ordinary activity (e.g. brother/sister – who makes their bed faster) in which you like to compete.
3. Knock-back is slang. What does it mean? Find other examples of slang in the chapter/book. What slang do people use today?
4. Willie uses the metaphor 'eaten up by the road'. What does this mean? What would his body have looked like?
5. Willie always pushed the limits in every activity. At the same time he learned some important lessons. What lessons has he learned so far?
6. Confidence is a word that fits naturally with Willie. Find examples of how he displays this.

Chapter Five - Soldier p.45

1. Find out what these words mean – commitments, confined, webbing, discipline, barracks.
2. Willie makes an effort to think of other people. Find some examples.
3. With a partner or in a group make up some questions you'd like to ask Willie so far. Share them with the group and decide on some answers.



4. When the going gets tough, the tough get going,' is a cliché. Find examples to show this is true for Willie.
5. Many of the Army's activities Willie talks about might seem unnecessary, harsh or even cruel. What purpose could the Army have for putting the recruits through these tasks?
6. Early on Willie was noticed by his superiors. What did he do that made him stand out?

Chapter Six – Fisherman - p.53

1. Willie is a good judge of character. To earn his respect, people have to have certain qualities. Discuss what the qualities might be.

Chapter Seven – Traveller - p.58

1. There are many myths surrounding the SAS. Complete an internet search using keywords – SAS myths. Share with the class.
2. Complete an internet search on Frank Rennie and David Stirling. Identify their key achievements in the SAS.
3. Willie has a sense of humour. Find examples to prove this statement.
4. 'Grunt' is the nickname for an infantryman. What other nicknames have been mentioned so far?
5. Harbour can mean safe place for boats. What does Willie mean when he says, '...managed to get back into my own harbour without getting shot at...'?

Chapter Eight – Peacemaker – p.65

1. Find out what these words mean – candidate, motivate, reconnaissance, elite.
2. To get through selection Willie needed lots of support. Who were the people who helped him?
3. Different events frighten different people. What events in this chapter may have frightened you? Discuss - does a good soldier need to be frightened sometimes?
4. Discuss what part of Willie's early training became important in East Timor.
5. Willie loves lambs' tongues. If you were away overseas with few supplies, what food would you want your family to send you?

Chapter Nine - Insider – p.72

1. Once again Willie goes through selection. What lessons does he learn this time?



2. Willie made small achievements through the days of selection. Note what you consider to be the important events that got him through the ordeal.

Chapter Ten – Fast Learner - p.82

1. Find out what these words mean – interrogation, terrorism, procedures, survival.
2. What is the goal of cycle?
3. Take each skill the men are taught during cycle. Discuss and rank them in order of importance.
4. List the items the men take with them. Discuss a use for each one.
5. Discuss and decide which skills Willie used during cycle that he might've learned as a child.
6. Which activities was Willie least confident about?

Chapter Eleven – Initiate – p.93

1. Find out what these words mean – commandant, gruelling.
2. 'Who Dares Wins' is the SAS motto. Complete an internet search for its meaning. Discuss.
3. What is your school motto and what does it mean?
4. Even though men in the SAS come from many ranks, rank isn't recognised. In the SAS all men are equal. Discuss and decide why this is important.
5. What was a lesson Willie learned from his childhood mates, his father and the Old Chap?
6. What does humble mean? Why do SAS members need humility?
7. How do the group members make sure they stay ready and prepared for action at all times?

Chapter Twelve – Badged Member – p.97

1. Discuss why you think not many people know of the SAS's operations? Should people know more?
2. Senior SAS members treated Willie as if he had always been a member but Willie didn't feel he had earned his place in the Group yet. Why might he feel like that?
3. What experience on cycle did Willie have that was useful in Afghanistan?



4. Willie mentions that the modern soldier is now weighed down with all sorts of equipment. In what situations would the gear be a help and when might it be a nuisance?
5. Willie did miss home while he was away. Discuss and decide what parts of your life you would miss if you were separated from your home for a long period.

Chapter Thirteen – Good Soldier – p.105

1. With a partner or in a group create a diary/timeline for the contact with the Taliban. You may have to estimate some times.
2. Circle the key moment - when Willie made his most important decision.

Chapter Fourteen – Mentor in Training - p.116

1. Find out what these words mean – reputation, motivated, perfection.
2. When Willie was in a leadership position how did he treat the men differently to how he was treated? Discuss whether this style is better than the old way?
3. List the important ideas that Willie learned about being a leader.
4. Decide what Willie enjoyed most about his time at Waiouru.
5. Give reasons why the Defence Force Chief thought Willie deserved the Victoria Cross more than the Gallantry Star.

Chapter Fifteen – Willie Apiata VC – p.126

1. Humility is part of being in the SAS. When the CO told Willie about the VC Willie showed great humility. Decide which words show this.
2. Choose five things you consider to be the most important about the Victoria Cross. Give reasons for your choices.
3. The VC has a dark side. Discuss how such a great honour can bring despair to the people who have been awarded it.

Chapter Sixteen – Celebrity - p.133

1. Willie had a very clear idea about who he was – What does this mean?
2. Willie's mother talks about him already being the family hero. Is this the same as being a military hero? Explain.
3. Throughout his life, Willie has done many dangerous things. But he says meeting the media was the freakiest thing he has ever done. Why did the media have this effect on him?



4. Willie didn't answer the question about being hit. Discuss what he might have been thinking.

Chapter Seventeen – Reluctant Hero - p.140

1. Willie describes what he thinks a hero is. Who in your family is a hero? Explain your choices.
2. After Willie received the VC how did his life change? Discuss what he found strange.

Chapter Eighteen – Te Kaha – p.146

1. Find out what this word means – commonwealth.
2. The East Coast now has two soldiers who have been awarded the VC. Is this a coincidence or does the way boys grow up on the Coast have a great effect on their character? Discuss and make a generalisation.
3. Willie says the only thing that makes him Maori is his name. True or false? Using direct passages from the text make an argument to support one view.
4. Willie is a very practical person. What is it that he wants people to respect the most about him? Why?
5. Re-read Willie's poem. Give an explanation of his meaning for the poem.

Chapter Nineteen – Europe – p.153

1. What happened at Passchendaele? Complete an internet search and report five important happenings.
2. Discuss why there are far fewer VCs awarded these days.
3. Many other VC holders have similar feelings to Willie. They think they don't deserve the award. Discuss and give reasons for this.
4. Soon after meeting each other, SAS members can talk as if they had known each other for much longer. Discuss and give reasons for this.
5. Willie has a new understanding of sacrifice. Find the definition of sacrifice then use the information in the chapter to describe what he means.

Chapter Twenty - Papakura – p.160

1. Find out what these words mean – armistice, recipients, posthumously.
2. How has Willie's VC changed the way that people treat him? Give examples.



3. Throughout his life, Willie has always set himself goals. He never gave up until he achieved them. Share some goals you have set for yourself.

Chapter Twenty-One – Waitangi – p.166

1. Find out what this word means – documentary.
2. When you read that Willie gave his medals to the ‘unit’ were you surprised? Why or why not?
3. After all the attention and congratulations, Willie still has his ‘feet placed firmly on the ground’. This is a cliché. What does Willie say that highlights this cliché.
4. ‘Life is like sugar cane. It has two ends, a sweet end and a sour end. You should start at the sour end first, work hard and eventually you will get to the sweet end.’ What does Willie mean and why should people start at the sour end?

Analytical reading/discussion and writing

People

Much of the text is in Willie’s words. The action takes place where he is and it is from his point of view that we learn about important people in his life. He is the one who subjectively chooses what to include and what to leave out.

1. Do you think we can be given honest portrayals of people in this way?
2. Can the author of an autobiography manipulate the reader to have them see things as they wish?
3. How might the people in Willie’s book describe themselves if given the chance to do so in their own life story?

Read chapters 1- 4

Mum

1. Are you able to form a picture in your mind of Willie’s mum? In a group, brainstorm physical characteristics for her. Write a description.
2. Identify a behaviour that Willie needs to improve. Write a note to him, telling him what needs to be done.
3. Willie’s mum is pakeha. What difficulties might she have had trying to settle in an area with many Maori? How would her children have helped her fit into the community?

Dad

1. Willie’s dad is a mysterious character. Even though Willie spent a lot of time with him when he was young, he doesn’t talk about him much. Discuss how living with his



Dad and living with his mum might be different. Make a list of dos and don'ts for each household.

2. Although he doesn't say so, we can guess that Willie learned a lot from his father. Make a list of practical skills his father taught him.

3. When Willie told his father he was leaving school, he didn't say what his father said. Discuss in a group how the conversation unfolded. In pairs act out the scene.

Sisters

1. Throughout his life, Willie has had a close relationship with his sisters. Name some of the activities they enjoyed together. Discuss and decide if the activity was Willie's idea, one of his sisters' ideas or a combination.

2. Read chapter sixteen. How did the sisters show their love for their brother?

Reuben (Old Chap)

1. After his father left, Reuben became a father figure for Willie. What activities did Reuben like that Willie's father liked too? How was Reuben's family different? Discuss and decide what sort of problems Willie might have had living with the Old Chap.

2. Make a list of the qualities that Willie admired about Reuben. Rank them in order of importance.

Read chapters 5-6

Workmates

1. Dave Woods and Don McLeod had similar qualities to Reuben. They also had something to teach Willie. List the jobs each man taught him. Discuss how these jobs could be useful to him in the army.

2. Complete an internet search for one of the jobs. Write and present a report with the important details.

Partner and son

1. Willie doesn't write much about his partner or son. Their names aren't mentioned. This has been done deliberately. Discuss and decide why.

Read chapters 5, 9 and 16-19

George, Sam and the CO

1. In the army, as in life, Willie was attracted to people who had skills and knowledge that he was curious about. George, Sam and the CO offered Willie quite different things. Read, find and share the new learning Willie gained from these men.

2. The army always wants new recruits. Search the internet for the NZ Army website. Read the recruitment information. Discuss and create a poster (include essential information) that advertises for new recruits.



Discussion/writing

Research

Use the internet in a restrained way to locate as much information about something mentioned in the book. You will visit many websites. Some will be more useful than others. Note the internet address which was most helpful. On your own or in pairs make a report to present to the class. Your report can be presented in any format – dramatic, interactive, written, mixed media.

Some ideas :

hunting

horse-breaking

demolition derby

rodeo

bush survival

Territorials

Infantry

army vehicles

tracking

SAS

bravery medals including the Victoria Cross

resistance to interrogation

hand to hand fighting

demolitions

Taliban

military weapons

Biography

Divide into pairs. Write a three paragraph autobiography. An autobiography should follow a specified pattern – full name, date of birth, names of parents, education and training, family relationships, achievements and life experiences e.g. overseas trips. Add in one exciting or dramatic happening that is not true. Share with your partner, Try to find the untrue event.

Visual language – establishing character

Willie is a strong character. There are many incidents in the book where he displays this. Choose a scene e.g. chapt. 1 – horse-breaking, hitch-hiking, building his sled; chapt. 2 – getting the pig home, sleeping on the fire; chapt.4 – joining the territorials; chapt. 5 – being woken up in the tent...

Rewrite the scene. Keep as close as possible to the described event but add in dialogue that could've been included. You are extending the range of the drama.

Ad lib the scene after you've established what the order of speech is.

Present to the class or group as a freeze frame or act out the scene completely.

